

# Avitus

**Eparchius Avitus**<sup>[1]</sup> (c. 390 – 457) was Roman emperor of the West from July 455 to October 456. He was a senator of Gallic extraction and a high-ranking officer both in the civil and military administration, as well as Bishop of Piacenza.

He opposed the reduction of the Western Roman Empire to Italy alone, both politically and from an administrative point of view. For this reason, as Emperor he introduced several Gallic senators in the Imperial administration; this policy, however, was opposed by the Senatorial aristocracy and by the people of Rome, who had suffered from the sack of the city by the Vandals in 455.

Avitus had a good relationship with the Visigoths, in particular with their king Theodoric II, who was a friend of his and who acclaimed Avitus Emperor. The possibility of a strong and useful alliance between the Visigoths and Romans faded, however, when Theodoric invaded Hispania at Avitus' behest, which rendered him unable to help Avitus against the rebel Roman generals who deposed him.

## Contents

Biography

Origins and early career

Rise to the throne

Consolidation of power

Foreign policy

Fall

Death

Footnotes

References

Bibliography

Primary sources

Secondary sources

External links

Avitus	
<span></span> <div>Solidus of Emperor Avitus</div>	
Roman emperor of the West (unrecognized in the East)	
Reign	9 July 455 – 17 October 456 (Eastern emperor: <u>Marcian</u> )
Predecessor	<u>Petronius Maximus</u>
Successor	<u>Majorian</u>
Born	c. 390 <sup>[1]</sup> <div><u>Clermont</u></div>
Died	456
Burial	<u>Brioude</u>
Issue	<u>Agricola</u> <div><u>Ecdicius</u></div> <div><u>Papianilla</u></div>
Names	Eparchius Avitus
Father	<u>Agricola</u> (possibly)

## Biography

### Origins and early career

Avitus was born in Clermont to a family of the Gallo-Roman nobility. His father was possibly Agricola, consul in 421. Avitus had two sons, Agricola (fl 455 – living 507, a vir illustris) and Ecdicius Avitus (later patricius and magister militum under Emperor Julius Nepos) and a daughter Papianilla; she married Sidonius Apollinaris, whose letters and panegyrics remain an important source for Avitus' life and times.



Tremissis of Emperor Avitus

Avitus followed a course of study typical for a young man of his rank, including law. Before 421 he was sent to the powerful patricius Flavius Constantius (briefly Emperor in 421) to ask for a tax reduction for his own country; this embassy was successful. His relative Theodorus was hostage at the court of the King of Visigoths, Theodoric I. In 425/426 Avitus went and met him and the King, who let Avitus enter his own court. Here, around 439, Avitus met the son of Theodoric, Theodoric II, who later became King. Avitus inspired the young Theodoric to study Latin poets.

He then started a military career serving under the magister militum Aetius in his campaign against the Juthungi and the Norics (430–431) and against the Burgundians (436). In 437, after being elevated to the rank of vir illustris, he returned to Avernia, where he held a high office, probably magister militum per Gallias. In the same year he defeated a group of Hunnish raiders near Clermont and obliged Theodoric to lift the siege of Narbonne. In 439 he became Praetorian prefect of Gaul and renewed the friendship treaty with the Visigoths.

Before the summer of 440, he retired to private life at his estate, Avitacum, near Clermont. Here he lived until 451 when the Huns, led by Attila, invaded the Western Roman Empire; Avitus persuaded Theodoric into an alliance with Rome, and the combined forces of Theodoric and Aetius defeated Attila in the Battle of Châlons; Theodoric died in the battle.

## Rise to the throne

In the late spring of 455, Avitus was recalled to service by emperor Petronius Maximus and was elevated to the rank of magister militum, probably praesentalis; Maximus sent Avitus in an embassy to the court of Theodoric II, who had succeeded to his father, at Toulouse. This embassy probably confirmed the new king and his people as foederati of the Empire and asked for their support for the new Emperor.<sup>[2]</sup>

While Avitus was at Theodoric's court, news came of the death of Petronius Maximus (31 May) and of the sack of Rome by the Vandals of Gaiseric. Theodoric acclaimed Avitus Emperor in Toulouse; on 9 July,<sup>[3]</sup> the new Emperor was acclaimed by the Gallic chiefs gathered in Viernum,<sup>[4]</sup> near Arelate (Arles), and later, around 5 August, before Avitus reached Rome, he received the recognition of the Roman Senate.<sup>[5]</sup>

Avitus stayed in Gaul for three months, to consolidate his power in the region that was the center of his support, and later went to Italy with a Gallic army, probably reinforced with a Gothic force. He probably travelled to Noricum to restore the imperial authority in that province, and then passed through Ravenna, where he left a Gothic force under the new patricius and magister militum Remistus, a Visigoth. On 21 September, finally, he entered Rome.<sup>[6]</sup>



Petronius Maximus, who obtained the throne at the death of Valentinian III, recalled Avitus from his private life and sent him to ask for support to the Visigoths, but, at the death of Maximus, they acclaimed Avitus Emperor

## Consolidation of power

The effective power of Avitus depended on the support of all the major players in the Western Roman Empire in the mid-5th century. The new Emperor needed the support of both the civil institutions, the Roman senate and the Eastern Roman Emperor Marcian, as well as that of the army and its commanders (the generals Majorian and Ricimer) and the Vandals of Gaiseric.

On 1 January 456, Avitus took the consulate,<sup>[7]</sup> as traditionally the Emperors held the consulate in the first year upon assuming the purple. However, his consulate *sine collega* (without a second Consul) was not recognised by the Eastern court, which nominated two consuls, Iohannes and Varanes. The fact that the two courts did not agree on a couple of consuls but each nominated its own means that despite the efforts of Avitus to receive the recognition of the Eastern Emperor,<sup>[8]</sup> the relationship between the two halves of the Empire was not optimal.

## Foreign policy

Treaties under Marcian and a treaty of 442 between emperor Valentinian III and the Vandal king Gaiseric had failed to reduce Vandal incursions and raids along the Italian coast. Avitus' own efforts secured a temporary winter truce with them; but in March 456, Vandals destroyed Capua. Avitus sent Ricimer to defend Sicily, and the Romans defeated the Vandals twice, once in a land battle near Agrigento and another in a naval battle off Corsica.<sup>[9]</sup>

During the reign of Avitus, the Visigoths expanded into Hispania, nominally under Roman authorisation but actually to promote their own interests. In 455 Avitus had sent an ambassador, *comes* Fronto, to the Suebi and then to Theodoric II to ask them to formally recognise Roman rule. When the Suebi invaded the Roman province of Hispania Tarraconensis, the Visigoths attacked and defeated them 5 October 456 at the Campus Paramus, twelve miles from Astorga, on the banks of the Órbigo (Urbicus),<sup>[10]</sup> subsequently occupying the province as nominal *foederati* of the Empire.

## Fall

In the meantime, resentment amongst the population of Italy against the "foreigner" Avitus grew. The Gallo-Roman Emperor had given many key offices of the public administration, usually filled by Romans, to other members of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy. Furthermore, the population of Rome, devastated by the sack of Rome, suffered from food shortages due to the Vandal control of the naval routes, aggravated by the requirements of the foreign troops that had arrived with Avitus. The imperial treasury was almost empty and, after disbanding his Visigoth guard because of popular pressure, Avitus was obliged to pay their huge wages by melting down and selling the bronze of some statues.<sup>[11]</sup>

Counting on the popular discontent, on the disbandment of the imperial guard, and on the prestige gained through their victories, Ricimer and the *comes domesticorum* Majorian rebelled against Avitus; the Emperor was obliged to leave Rome in early autumn and to move north. Ricimer had the Roman Senate depose Avitus and ordered the murder of the *magister militum* Remistus in the *Palatium* at Classe, ancient port of Ravenna, on 17 September 456.<sup>[12]</sup>



Majorian, *comes domesticorum* of Avitus, and Ricimer, a general of barbaric descent, rebelled against their Emperor, defeated him near Piacenza, and obliged him to become Bishop of the city. It was Majorian who succeeded Avitus on the throne.

Avitus decided to react. First he chose Messianus, one of his collaborators in his embassy to the Visigoths ordered by Petronius Maximus, as the new *magister militum*; then he probably went to Gaul (Hydatius says to Arelate)<sup>[13]</sup> to collect all the available forces, probably the Visigoth guard he had just disbanded; finally he led his forces against the troops of Ricimer, near Piacenza. The Emperor and his army entered the city and attacked the huge army led by Ricimer, but after a great massacre of his men, including Messianus, Avitus fled on 17 or 18 October 456. In the immediate aftermath Ricimer spared his life, but forced him to become Bishop of Piacenza.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Death

Avitus' Gallic supporters may still have recognised him as emperor, despite his deposition. Sidonius Apollinaris tells of a failed *coup d'état* in Gaul organised by one Marcellus<sup>[15]</sup> and probably aimed at bringing Avitus back on the throne.<sup>[16]</sup> The contemporary historian Hydatius, who lived in Spain, considered the year 457 the third of Avitus' reign;<sup>[17]</sup> Avitus' own intentions are not known, nor are the manner and date of his death, of which there are several versions. In some, he was told that the Roman Senate had condemned him to death, and so he tried to flee to Gaul, officially travelling there to bring donations to the basilica of Saint Julian in Avernia, his homeland; according to Gregory of Tours, he died during this journey.<sup>[18]</sup> Other sources have him strangled or starved to death, by order of his successor. Avitus died in 457, or late in 456, very soon after his deposition, and was buried at Brioude, next to Saint Julian's tomb.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Footnotes

---

- i. This is the name given by the PLRE, RE, OCD and RIC, citing an inscription recorded in Rossi, *Inscriptiones christianae Urbis Romae* I, p. 344. Ersch & Gruber's *Allgemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* reports that "Marcus Maecilius" and "Flavius Maecilius" are found on Avitus' coins, while "Flavius Eparchius" appears in inscriptions (vol. Appellation – Arzilla, pp. 505–508, Winterhalder [1820]). RE (vol. II,2, col. 2395) notes that one such coin, bearing the inscription M. MAECIL. AVITHUS (*sic*), Eckhel, *Doctrina Numorum Veterum* viii. 193, was authenticated only by Banduri, and perhaps suspect. J. B. Bury in his *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (1923) suggested "Marcus Maecilius Flavius Eparchius Avitus".

## References

---

1. Avitus was appointed to his first political task shortly before 421. Sidonius Apollinaris (*Carmina* VII 208) described him as a *iuvenis* at the time, so he was probably between the ages of 30 and 45. For *iuvenis* as an age category, see Andrew Gillet, "The Birth of Ricimer," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 1995, p. 383 note 23.
2. Petronius Maximus ascended to the throne on 17 March 455, after Emperor Valentinian III had been killed by a conspiracy in which Petronius was involved.
3. *Fasti vindobonenses priores* record date about 10 July.
4. According to Sidonius Apollinaris, vii.571–579, Avitus was crowned with a torc, the typical Gallic neck ring with which Julian had also been crowned.
5. *Fasti vindobonenses priores*, n. 575; Cassiodorus, 1264.
6. *Auctuarium Prosperi*, 7.
7. On this occasion, Sidonius Apollinaris declaimed his panegyric.
8. Hydatius writes (*Chronicle*, 166) that Avitus sent some ambassadors to Marcian to discuss the separation of their spheres of influences, and later (*Chronicle*, 169) adds that the two emperors ruled in agreement.

9. See Priscus, *History*, fragment 24, and Hydatius, 176–177.
10. E. A. Thompson, "The End of Roman Spain. Part II", *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 1977.
11. John of Antioch, fragment 202.
12. *Fasti vindobonenses priores*, 579; *Auctuarium Prosperi Havniense*, 1.
13. Hydatius, 177.
14. *Fasti vindobonenses priores*, 580 (reporting 17 October as the day of the battle); *Auctuarium Prosperi*, s.a. 456 (reporting 18 October); Victor of Tuenno, s.a. 455 (reporting Avitus' consecration by the Bishop of Milan, Eusebius).
15. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters*, i.11.6.
16. Mathisen.
17. Hydatius, *Chronicle*, 183..
18. Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, ii.11.
19. For modern scholarly analyses and list of ancient and modern sources for the circumstances of Avitus' final year and death, see Ralph W. Mathisen, "The Third Regnal Year of Eparchius Avitus," *Classical Philology*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Oct., 1985), pp. 326-335. For a response, and alternative interpretations of the same materials, see R. W. Burgess, "The Third Regnal Year of Eparchius Avitus: A Reply," *Classical Philology*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Oct., 1987), pp. 335-345.

## Bibliography

---

### Primary sources

Major source for Avitus' life until his rise to the throne is the panegyric written in occasion of his consulate by Sidonius Apollinaris (431–486):

- Sidonius Apollinaris, *Panegyric for Avitus*

For the history of his reign, the major sources are the Spaniard historian Hydatius (400 c. – 469 c.) and the Byzantine chronicler John of Antioch (first half of the 7th century):


- Hydatius, *Chronicle*
- John of Antioch, *Chronicle*

### Secondary sources

- Jones, Arnold Hugh Martin, John Robert Martindale, John Morris, "Eparchius Avitus 5", *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press, 1992, ISBN 0-521-20159-4, pp. 196–198.
- Mathisen, Ralph W., "Avitus (9/10 July 455 – 17/18 October 456)" (<http://www.roman-emperors.org/avitus.htm>), *De Imperatoribus Romanis*
- Randers-Pehrson, Justine Davis. "Barbarians and Romans: The Birth Struggle of Europe, A.D. 400–700". Norman University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. p. 251.

## External links

---

-  Media related to Avitus at Wikimedia Commons
- Gibbon chapter XXXVI (<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext97/dfre310h.htm>)

- Latin text of Sidonius's *carmen* ([https://web.archive.org/web/20070826163557/http://home.casema.nl/marcelkuyper/sidonius\\_bestanden/sid\\_carmen\\_vii.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20070826163557/http://home.casema.nl/marcelkuyper/sidonius_bestanden/sid_carmen_vii.html))
  - (<https://archive.org/stream/doctrinanumorum04hohlgoog#page/n208/mode/2up>) Joseph Hilarius Eckhel, "M. Maecil. Avitus", *Doctrina Numorum Veterum*, viii. 193, 2nd Ed. (1828).
  - Arthur Penryhn Stanley, "M. Maecilius Avitus" (<https://archive.org/stream/dictionaryofgre01smituoft#page/434/mode/2up>), in the *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, William Smith, ed., vol. I, p. 435 (1870).
- 

Retrieved from "<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Avitus&oldid=1051247146>"

---

**This page was last edited on 22 October 2021, at 11:10 (UTC).**

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.